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ABSTRACT

None of the theories that inform writing center work--Freudian theory, cognitivism, feminism, postmodernism, current-traditionalism, expressivism, social constructionism, and family systems theory--offer an adequate basis for writing center work. Even when Stephen North proposed "The Idea of a Writing Center" in 1984 (still considered to be the theoretical foundation of writing centers), he later retracted much of it as being impractical. For the past 30 years writing centers have considered themselves to be eclectic, so defined that research performed in one center is irrelevant to other writing centers. This paper discusses how borrowing two composition theories affected both Stephen North's writing center and the author's, and how emphasizing eclecticism has led to this reliance on borrowing rather than formulating theory. The two theories borrowed from composition are product and process--Eric Hobson considers these to be "trite descriptions," but the paper considers them apt descriptions of writing center work. The paper discusses the clash between product and process and outlines a specific clash and its outcome at Regis University's Writing Center, founded in 1989. It states that while the basis for real theory exists in writing centers' practices, it has no forum for discussion. The paper contends that until writing centers develop genuine writing center theory based on practice, they are all subject to being dismissed as fluff--nice to have in good times but unnecessary when budget cuts loom. (Contains 3 tables and 23 notes.) (NKA)

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Theorizing Eclectic Writing Centers

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My Place or Yours: Theorizing Eclectic Writing Centers

For many years, we in writing centers have heeded the bewitching call of other disciplines' theory rather than formulating our own. Consider all the theories that inform writing center work: Freudian theory, family systems theory, cognitivism, feminism, postmodernism, current-traditionalism, expressivism, and social constructionism, to name just a few. Yet, none of these theories offer an adequate basis for writing center work. And, even when Stephen North proposed "The Idea of a Writing Center" in 1984, a piece that is still considered to be the theoretical foundation of writing centers, he later retracted much of it as being impractical. I believe that our lack of genuine and suitable writing center theory results from the notion that, for the past 30 years, writing centers have considered themselves to be eclectic, so defined by individual institutional contexts that research performed in one center is irrelevant to other writing centers. This paper discusses how borrowing two composition theories affected both Stephen North's writing center and mine, and how emphasizing eclecticism has led to this reliance on borrowing rather than formulating theory.

The two theories borrowed from composition that I will consider are product and process. Eric Hobson considers these to be "trite descriptions,"[1] but I consider them apt descriptions of writing center work. Early writing centers, especially remedial labs, were based on product or current-traditional theory. In opposition to this approach, compositionists developed the process

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[1]Eric Hobson, "Maintaining Our Balance: Walking the Tightrope of Competing Epistemologies," *The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Writing Center Theory and Practice*, ed. Robert W. Barnett and Jacob S. Blumner (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2001) 101.

or expressivist theory in the 1970s. Initially, process theory did not benefit writing centers. As Peter Carino asserts, writing centers' remedial status was reinforced by the process movement: Composition faculty concerned themselves with writing as a process, leaving writing centers to enforce correctness and remediation.[2] That changed, however, when writing centers adopted the process approach themselves.

When Stephen North wrote "The Idea of a Writing Center" in 1984, he embraced the tenets of the process theory.[3] This theory dictated that writing was recursive, so North proposed that writing center tutors should unobtrusively insert themselves into the writing process in order to produce better writers, not better writing.[4] This goal of producing better writers divorced writing centers from the product-oriented, current-traditional theory.

Ten years later, however, a disillusioned North wrote "Revisiting 'The Idea of a Writing Center,'" calling his original work a "romantic idealization."[5] Among other problems with his original "Idea," North found that students were not motivated to improve as writers; most only wanted a better grade on a particular piece of writing—a better product. Therefore, in order to preserve its process orientation, North chose to contract his writing center and focus its work on select students who were truly committed to improving themselves as writers. North could not

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[2]Peter Carino, "Writing Centers and Writing Programs: Local and Communal Politics," *The Politics of Writing Centers*, ed. Jane Nelson and Kathy Evertz (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook) 2.

[3]Carino 6.

[4]Stephen North, "The Idea of a Writing Center," *Rhetoric and Composition: A Sourcebook for Teachers and Writers*, ed. Richard L. Graves (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1990) 238.

[5]Stephen North, "Revisiting 'The Idea of a Writing Center,'" *The Writing Center Journal* 15.1 (Fall 1994): 9.

make process theory alone work in his writing center, so he changed its configuration rather than revising his theoretical approach.

The clash between product and process had a different outcome at the Regis Writing Center, which was founded in 1989 by an English department professor who embraced process theory. This is quite clear in the first director's vision of a writing center:

> The Writing Center is a community of writers designed to support one another. It is NOT a remedial center. We will not teach you grammar or punctuation. We will not dictate to you or write for you. We will not place ultimatums on you, pressure you, or coerce you. We WILL challenge you, help you, and guide you toward your best writing skills. Together, we can investigate every facet of the writing process, from the initial brainstorming session to the final polish.[6]

The final polish did not include proofreading, because during these first years, proofreading was an anathema, a relic of current-traditionalism, and the word "grammar" was uttered only in connection with articles like Jean Sanborn's "Grammar: Good Wine Before Its Time."[7]

During these early years, the Regis Writing Center had a nomadic existence, moving to and from five different locations, and occupying space that no one else needed or wanted. Despite the first director's enthusiasm and commitment that produced a viable writing center, a number of faculty were less than impressed with its process orientation. In fact, several years later, one professor told me vehemently, "Don't let those kooks in the English department take

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[6]"Yo!!! Do Not Throw This Away!!!" (Denver: Regis University Writing Center, January 1991).

[7]Jean Sanborn, "Grammar: Good Wine before Its Time," *English Journal (*March 1986): 72-80.

over the writing center again." During the first five years of its existence when the writing center was solely process oriented, the number of student visits hovered around 250 per semester.

A new director, who was not associated with the English department, took over in 1994. Because her approach was balanced between process and product, she rewrote the writing center philosophy to read:

> The Regis Writing Center has offered a supportive environment for writers of all abilities since 1989. Our belief is that writing is both a process and a product. We help students at any stage of writing, from brainstorming to revising, because we assert that good writing comes from REwriting. We also believe that the written product is important, so we help students with their grammar and usage and suggest ways they can proofread their final drafts. Although we do not guarantee "A" papers, we do offer the resources necessary for improving both writing and writers.[8]

Under this new philosophy, grammar review became part of tutor training, along with discussion of the writing process: revising, reshaping, reorganizing, and rethinking. This second configuration, which incorporated process and product, drew better administrative support, and the center finally was endowed with a permanent space in a visible location. As Carol Haviland, Carmen Fye, and Richard Colby state, location is a political decision: How much visibility a writing center is granted not only determines its success but also signifies its importance to the university.[9] When the Regis Writing Center changed its approach and was rewarded with

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[8]Brochure (Denver: Regis University Writing Center, Fall 1997).

[9]Carol Peterson Haviland, Carmen M. Fye, and Richard Colby, "The Politics of Administrative and Physical Location," *The Politics of Writing Centers*, ed. Jane Nelson and Kathy Evertz (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2001): 85.

permanent space in a classroom building, the number of student visits quadrupled to around 1,000 per semester.

The Regis Writing Center remains a blend of process and product because this is what students want. A sampling of 1195 visitors to the writing center over eleven years' time shows that they wanted the following help:

Table 1
Writing Center Visits, Fall 1989-Spring 2001
Writer Needed Help With

Proofreading	42.43%
Organization	31.13%
Reader's feedback	23.77%
Defining a topic	2.68%

The writing center is willing to *help* with proofreading--the product--because Regis students, like North's, seek correctness. Proofreading enhances correctness, which in turn influences grades, and it's difficult to imagine any student not wanting a better grade. But, along with students' desire for correctness, notice that 55% wanted help with process-related issues such as feedback and organization. Thus, offering only process or only product would be insufficient.

Further support for our dual emphasis is found in student evaluations of Freshman Writing Seminar, the introductory composition course. Course evaluations show that students use the required grammar handbook:

Table 2
Freshman Writing Seminar Evaluations, Fall 2001 (251 Responses)
Times Used Diana Hacker's *A Writer's Reference*

Four or more times	51%
Three times	16%
Twice	16%
Once or never	8%

Handbooks such as Diana Hacker's promote authoritarian correctness, which is important in the product theory.

While seminar students are concerned with correctness, they also engage in writing as a process. Seminar students claim that they revise multiple times:

Table 3
Freshman Writing Seminar Evaluations, Fall 2001 (251 Responses)
# of Times Most Papers Are Revised

More than 3 revisions	21%
Three	34%
Two	37%
One	8%
None	2%

If 55% revise three or more times, it appears that they accept writing as a process. From their answers to this question, of course, we do not know how substantive their revisions are, but from my experience teaching this course, I know that most revisions are extensive. And, from my experience as a writing center director and the statistics shown in Table 1, I know that about half the time students appear in the writing center when they need a correct product. Yet, the other half of the time they visit the writing center when they have process concerns.

Thus, neither process nor product theory alone was sufficient for North's or my writing center, even though these theories arose from composition studies, which would seem to be an adequate basis for writing center work. However, an author working in solitude or a professor teaching 30 students of varying abilities in a classroom differ vastly from an author working with an immediate audience. Neither product nor process theory alone could help the variety of students with their myriad concerns who appear every day in writing centers. A student who is a proficient writer and wants help proofreading finds no help in a writing center that is focused on the process approach, and a basic writer struggling to formulate a thesis is not well served by a writing center employing the product theory.

Lest you object that this is obvious that no two students are alike and no one theory could serve all students adequately, let me point out that many writing centers today still are bound to process theory only. For example, most responses on the WCenter listserve come from directors who cling to the process ideal. On the listserve in January 2002, the topic of helping students prepare for the MCAT, LSAT, and other timed proficiency tests arose. Listserve respondents advised writing center directors to *avoid* helping writers focus on these products and instead to find a way to view them as process.[10] Similarly, in a discussion about grammar in October 2001, one listserve respondent asked why there was a stigma to teaching grammar in college, including teaching it in writing centers.[11] She was referred to Patrick Hartwell's 1985 anti-product article,

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[10]Vickie Kokkalenios, "Re: LSAT Question" WCenter listserve, Jan. 29, 2002 <http://english.ttu.edu/wcenter/>; Kurt Bouman, "RE: Preparing students for timed essays and grammar tests," WCenter listserve, Jan. 25, 2002 <http://english.ttu.edu/wcenter/>.

[11]Rita Dudley, "Re: Grammar teaching in the writing center," WCenter listserve, Oct. 17, 2001 <http://english.ttu.edu/wcenter/>.

"Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar," which dismisses teaching grammar as a futile effort because of humans' innate, Chomskian command of grammar.[12]

Of course, other theories also influenced writing center work through the years. In particular, social constructionism, as evident in Andrea Lunsford's "Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center,"[13] influences writing center work even today. Is knowledge socially constructed? Of course it is. Is this dangerous territory for writing centers? Indeed, it is, as Molly Wingate warns in "What Line? I Didn't See Any Line."[14] Can peer tutors create knowledge? Of course, but, as John Trimbur points out, this may disrupt the peer relationship and substitute a hierarchy in place of equality.[15] None of these problems with social constructionism increases my confidence that this theory is suitable for writing center work, and, similarly, I have serious objections to other borrowed theories. Thus, like Neal Lerner, I believe that writing centers have no theoretical basis of their own, merely a haphazard amalgam of theories.

These borrowed theories put the cart before the horse, allowing theory to dictate practice, despite Sharon Crowley's admonishment that composition scholarship should *invert* the traditional academic privileging of theory over practice.[16] When a writer and a tutor sit side by

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[12]Patrick Hartwell, "Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar," *College English* 47.2 (February 1985): 105-127.

[13]Andrea Lunsford, "Collaboration, Control, and the Writing Center," *The Writing Center Journal* 12.1 (1991): 3-10.

[14]Molly Wingate, "What Line? I Didn't See Any Line," *A Tutor's Guide: Helping Writers One to One*, ed. Ben Rafoth (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2000) 9-16.

[15]John Trimbur, "Peer Tutoring: A Contradiction in Terms," *The Writing Center Journal* 7.2: 21-28.

[16]Sharon Crowley, *Composition in the University: Historical and Polemical Essays*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998) 3.

side puzzling over a piece of writing, they don't consider to process or product or social constructionist theory. Rather, the tutor and writer negotiate an agenda that arises from practical considerations–a paper, a grade, a professor's expectations, a writer's strengths and shortcomings, as well as the tutor's strengths and weaknesses. This is not to say that theory is not involved in sessions, however; as Al DeCiccio, Michael Rossi, and Kathleen Shine Cain note, "While writing center theorists debate with one another, a parallel conversation among tutors and tutees is constructing real theory."[17]

Why did writing centers adopt these borrowed theories? I believe that adopting a pastiche of theories and privileging the theoretical over praxis is fueled by our self-pronounced eclecticism. I'm not arguing that we don't inhabit very diverse institutional homes. But are we eclectic--so very different from each other? We say that we are: In 1990, Muriel Harris stated that writing centers "differ from one another because they have evolved within different kinds of institutions and different programs and therefore serve different needs."[18] Four years later, North said that he would not presume to dictate what would work for other writing centers because "institutional arrangements seem...too idiosyncratic, and writing centers' political visions too varied,"[19] a sentiment that was echoed by Nancy Grimm in 1996.[20] I am certain that differences in institutional contexts are real—I need only look at Shireen Carroll, Bruce Pegg, and Stephen

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[17]Albert C. DeCiccio,, Michael J. Rossi, Kathleen Shine Cain, "Walking the Tightrope: Negotiating Between the Ideal and the Practical in the Writing Center," *Writing Center Perspectives*, ed. Byron L. Stay and Christina Murphy (Emmitsburg, MD: NWCA Press, 1995) 26.

[18]Carino 10.

[19]Stephen M. North, "Revisiting 'The Idea of a Writing Center,'" *The Writing Center Journal* 15.1 (Fall 1994): 15.

[20]Nancy Maloney Grimm, "Rearticulating the Work of the Writing Center," *CCC* 47.4 (December 1996): 534-35.

Newman's recent study of small writing centers[21] to prove that—but I am not so certain that these differences mean that no suitable theory can emerge from our practices. However, if we focus on our differences, as we have in the past, then conversing about our practices seems irrelevant: My place and yours are unique.

While the basis for real theory exists in writing centers' practices, it has no forum for discussion. For example, after 4 Cs last year, a WCenter listserve participant worried that conference presentations have deteriorated into a discussion of individual writing centers, which "distracts us from examining our field in a more scholarly way."[22] His concern about establishing a scholarly (theoretical) focus ran counter to a conversation I had at 4 Cs in 2001 with a fellow writing center director, who said with a note of exasperation in his voice, "I hope that these sessions offer some practical advice about running my writing center. I'm tired of hearing about theory." This lack of conversation about practical matters is not a recent phenomenon: DeCiccio, Rossi, and Cain describe theory being privileged over practice at NCTE, CCCC, and NWCA conferences in the mid-1990s.[23] Unfortunately, the theory that is being discussed is not writing center theory; it is borrowed theory from other disciplines.

If we in writing centers can't talk about our practices, and we attempt to import theory rather than creating our own, and we celebrate our differences rather than identifying our

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[21]Shireen Carroll, Bruce Pegg, and Stephen Newman, "Size Matters: Administering a Writing Center in a Small Private College," Fourth National Writing Centers Association Conference, Bloomington, IN, 16 April 16 1999. Narrative discussion of the survey is found in "Size matters: Administering a writing center in a small college setting," *The Writing Lab Newsletter* 24.5 (Jan. 2000): 1-5.

[22]Jim Bell, "CCCCs Impressions," WCenter listserve, 20 Mar. 2001 <http://english.ttu.edu/wcenter/>.

[23]DeCiccio, Rossi, Cain 32.

similarities, then I see a dim future for writing centers. Writing centers have long sought to claim a legitimate, integral, and viable place in the academy, a place where funding is assured and respect is accorded. But, until writing centers develop genuine writing center theory based on practice, we are all subject to being dismissed as fluff—nice to have in good times but unnecessary when budget cuts loom. Few administrators or faculty understand how writing center practices differ from classroom teaching. We can demonstrate that these differences exist, however, by performing research about our practices and developing theory based on these results. By doing this, we may even learn that we are unique but not eclectic.

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